

“Home, at last”

The Reverend Shawn Newton
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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“Return to the home of your soul.”¹

It’s a beautiful sentiment.
Such a lovely invitation.

“Return to the home of your soul.”

But these few words raise a lot of questions!

Just where is the home of our souls?

If we’re no longer there,
and we’re somehow meant to return,
when and how and why did we ever leave?

Do we actually know where and what the home of our souls is?
And do we have any idea of how to find our way back?

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As Unitarians, we celebrate that a spiritual home
can be found in many places—
from a temple to a stand of trees,
at centre ice or at coffee,
with a beloved person or with our most cherished memories.

The home of our soul, though, I believe,
is something different than a spiritual home, or a house of worship.

The home of our soul is less a place, and more a state of being;
it is a felt awareness of our deep connection
to that which is bigger than us, and beyond us.

Sometimes, if we’re lucky, an outward spiritual home

¹ The sermon followed the singing of “Return Again,” which includes the line “Return to the home of your soul.”

is also where we find the home of our soul—
or better, a home for our soul,
since the soul can have many different homes.

Certainly, for some of us, at least on occasion,
a religious community such as this is where our soul feels at home—
or at least catch glimpses of a place our souls long to be.

Speaking to this feeling,
Kay Montgomery, a longtime leader in our tradition
once claimed to have invented Unitarian Universalism, all by herself.

And, she says, that she knows:
“numerous other people who have done this as well.”

“I did it,” she says, “on buses,
travelling up and down Livernois Avenue in Detroit.”

I was seventeen or so, a working class Catholic,
living with my parents and attending a Jesuit college
about ten miles away.

The Jesuits would have been astonished [...]

Each day that bus went within half a mile or so of a Unitarian Church,
but I didn't know that and, if I had known,
it wouldn't have meant a thing.

A decade later in another city,
long after I had left ‘The Church,’
I stumbled on a passage in a book that described Unitarian Universalism.

I was astonished: this thing I had invented actually existed –
a richer version than mine,
a version with a religious, intellectual, and cultural tradition
I couldn't have imagined, but still, identifiably mine.

And then there was the experience so many of us have had –
of coming home.

“Of coming home.”

Perhaps that is something you've felt in this community.
When you first found us, maybe,
or at a particularly tender moment.

Across the years, I have heard many of you say
that in arriving here, you felt you had come home.

When people tell me this,
what I hear is not so much that they've found a physical location,
which isn't even available to us these pandemic days,
as much as they've found within themselves
a place where their heart is broken open,
where they, in a new way,
encounter the depths of who they are,
and where they become aware in ways they can't deny
or sometimes even describe,
that they feel connected to something sacred,
something precious, powerful, and profound—
something we and humans have, from the beginning,
named in many different ways.

Such experiences, whether they're found in this community
or in countless other places,
have the potential to change our lives in beautiful and lasting ways.

Or not.

For reasons that are sometimes hard to comprehend,
there seems to be both a deep yearning to find a home for our souls,
and an inherent resistance or inbuilt inability
to sticking around once we find it.

It's hard, it seems, to dwell for long in the home of our souls.
Hence the call to return.

The great stories of humankind are so often built on this narrative—
of one setting out from home and trying to find the way back.

Religious literature is filled with accounts
of people seeking out the home of their souls,

only to abandon it, or lose it, or forget it once they find it.

How very easily, it seems, we can move away
from an encounter with the sacred,
perhaps because its beauty overwhelms us,
or we fear its potential to completely upend our world
if we were to take it all in,
if we were to take it seriously.

So, we move away from the home of our soul,
often forgetting the way back.

We end up homeless,
uncertain of where to begin to find the home of our soul,
let alone to return to it over and over again.

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In his book *A Hidden Wholeness*,
Quaker teacher Parker Palmer tells of a time:

...when farmers on the [Prairies],
at the first sign of a blizzard,
would run a rope from the back door out to the barn.

They all knew stories of people
who had wandered off and been frozen to death,
having lost sight of home while still in their own backyards.

Today[, he says,] we live in a blizzard of another sort.
It swirls around us as economic injustice, ecological ruin,
physical and spiritual violence, and their inevitable outcome[s].

It swirls within us as fear and frenzy, greed and deceit.

We all know stories of people who have wandered off into the [chaos]
and been separated from their own souls,
losing their moral bearings and even their mortal lives;
they [often] make headlines
because they take so many innocents down with them.

The lost ones come from every walk of life:
clergy and corporate executives,
politicians and people on the street,
celebrities and schoolchildren...
Some of us fear that we, or those we love,
will become lost in the storm.

Some are lost at this moment,
and are trying to find the way home.

Some are lost without [even] knowing it.

...But my own experience of the blizzard, [he writes,]
which includes getting lost in it more than I like to admit,
tells me that however we deny it or forget it,
however lost we feel in the whiteout,
still we dwell in the soul's backyard,
with chance after chance to regain our own bearings.

We can still tie a rope from the back door out to the barn,
and survive the blizzard [of this life]
without losing our hope or our way.

There is, I believe, a hunger in our world—
a yearning of people seeking to live lives of meaning and purpose
but with growing uncertainty of how to do so.

The answers offered up by both traditional religion and secular society
are not satisfying that hunger in the ways they once did.

And people are losing sight of the sacred bonds
that bind us to each other and to all of life.

So often people are separated from the heart of who they are,
detached from their deepest values,
alienated from any sense of their life's highest purpose.

Our world, our city, our own life is not unlike that barnyard.

There are people lost in the storm all about us.

If we're honest, we're all out there in the storm from time to time.

Lost and afraid.

Depressed or in despair.

Furious at the state of the world.

That's why that rope is so vitally important.

That lifeline in the storm.

That thread we so desperately need

to remind us of the sacred bonds that tie us to everything.

The tether that brings us back to life,
that reminds us that we are—in spite of it all—
people of hope and courage and commitment.

The thing is to find the rope and to never let go.

And for those fortunate enough to have found it,
there is a sacred obligation to help others find their way to the rope.

Like Buddhist bodhisattvas, we are to be that rope,
that loving lifeline, helping to lead people home.

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Robert Fulghum shares the story
of sitting next to a young woman several years ago at a Hong Kong airport.

She sat there quietly, wearing faded blue jeans and an old T-shirt,
when, suddenly, she began to cry.

He tried to ignore her at first but her crying grew louder.

After a few long minutes he looked at her
and asked, in a kindly way, "What's wrong?"

She told him the whole story.
Through the tears, she explained
she was returning home sooner than she had planned.

Her money had run out and she had been waiting to fly home on stand-by.

For two days, she had been waiting in that airport terminal,
and had just received word that a seat was waiting for her.

Her problem, though, was she had lost her ticket,
and the plane was about to leave.

Fulghum frantically helped her look through all of her possessions,
but the ticket couldn't be found.

His heart was breaking for her
and the only thing he could think to do
was to offer to grab her something to eat.

She accepted his offer of food.

But, when she stood up to go with him to the food kiosk,
she suddenly screamed.

There on her seat was her ticket.
She had been sitting on it the whole time.

She gave Fulghum an enormous hug
and thanked him for his kindness.

She then ran toward her gate,
and he never saw her again.

So often, we are sitting on our ticket home, aren't we?

So it is with the home of our soul.

The rope to get us there is sometimes closer than we think.

All it takes is an act of kindness and compassion to reveal it.

And with practice, with spiritual practice,
may we come to know that we can always be home,
no matter where we are,
no matter what our circumstances.

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In their book *No Foreign Land*, Wilfred Pelletier and Ted Poole write:

Wherever you are is home
And the earth is paradise
Wherever you set your feet is holy land...
You don't live off it like a parasite.
You live in it, and it in you,
Or you don't survive.
And that is the only worship... there is.

“Wherever you are is home.”

“Wherever you set your feet is holy land...”

My hope is that each of you live to learn the truth of these words
across the days of your life.

That you may find yourselves at home,
dwelling in the heart of your soul,
by living fully into each precious moment—
wherever the journey of your days may take you.

So may it be.